The Tourism Encounter in Community-Based Tourism in Northern Thailand: Empty Meeting Ground or Space for Change?

Claudia Dolezal

This article offers a contribution to the anthropology of tourism by investigating the tourism encounter in community-based tourism (CBT) in Northern Thailand. It does so by discussing MacCannell's (1992) idea of the Empty Meeting Grounds and Said's *Orientalism* (1978), two works that contributed to research on power inequalities between tourists and residents in the developing world. By establishing a relationship between the two and embedding these in the wider literature on the tourism encounter, this article suggests moving away from binaries towards understanding the space of the tourism encounter and its potential for change. Building on empirical research conducted in Ban Mae Kampong, a CBT village in Northern Thailand, findings suggest that CBT shows signs of resident-host interactions that are based on understanding and learning rather than exploitation. While also in CBT friendships and meaning take time to emerge and the 'Other' is used as attraction, villagers' agency and control over tourism are acknowledged. This paper therefore calls for a revisiting of the theoretical grounding that influences our understanding of the tourism encounter and argues for an investigation of community power relations in connection to the tourism encounter and its potential for residents' empowerment in CBT.

Keywords: Community-Based Tourism; Empowerment; Northern Thailand; Orientalism; Tourism Encounter

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INTRODUCTION

During the last few decades, social scientists have contributed to a wide understanding of tourism as a socio-cultural phenomenon. Much research has been conducted on the host-guest relationship (Smith, 1989), especially in the Global South, where the difference between the two parties is strongly pronounced (McNaughton, 2006; Mowforth & Munt, 2003; van der Duim, Peters, & Wearing, 2005). Tourism studies have largely been influenced by (post)colonial thinking, involving a superior and an inferior, i.e. a suppressed Other (Said, 1978), mostly in the form of the post-modern tourist versus the ex-primitive and exotic host (MacCannell, 1992). MacCannell's (1992) book on the *Empty Meeting Grounds* significantly contributed to how the tourism encounter is still perceived today, particularly in the developing world. This resulted in the tourist being characterized as intruder into peaceful communities, leading to a number of negative socio-cultural impacts (Smith, 2003). The tourist gaze (Urry, 2002), the consump-

tion of exotic culture (Yamashita, 2003), the intrusion into private space and cultural commoditization (Cole, 2007; Holden, 2006) are all well researched issues. Over the years, this somewhat intangible exploitation of residents contributed a great part to tourism's negative connotation.

However, recent studies have shown that the tourism encounter does not have to be negative and exploitative. Scheyvens (2002), for example, argues that the interactions between tourists and residents may lead to empowerment of the latter, depending on the interest tourists show in local culture and traditions. Furthermore, it is increasingly acknowledged that residents are also subjects in the tourism encounter and have agency and control (Oakes, 2005; Stronza, 2001), for example when returning the gaze, which is by far not one-sided (Maoz, 2006). Above all, alternative forms of tourism, such as community-based tourism (CBT), should give power to residents in planning, managing, and implementing tourism (Boonratana, 2010; Murphy, 1983) thereby leading to a more fruitful tourism encounter. Nevertheless, concepts of Orientalism and the Empty Meeting Grounds still influence tourism research to date.

This paper proposes a more balanced view on the host-guest-relationship by conducting a more detailed analysis of both sides constructing the tourism encounter. This proposal serves as a kind of intervention into recent tourism research that has tended to focus mainly on the tourists' side (Erb, 2000; Galani-Moutafi, 2000; Nyaupane, Teye, & Paris, 2008). I argue, however, that it is useful to consider the possibility of a change in the perceptions of tourism encounters or even counter-arguments to Said's and MacCannell's ideas. A number of questions drive the present paper and challenge the tourism industry's reputation as an "Otherness machine" (Aitchison, 2001, p. 144): What is the nature of tourism meeting grounds? Is the encounter a "utopian vision of profit without exploitation" (MacCannell, 1992, p. 28) or is there a chance for residents' empowerment and a collapse of the 'Other' vs. 'Self' division?

Specifically, this paper investigates whether tourism has the potential to create the basis for a more equitable and equally beneficial tourism experience for hosts and guests, and also if MacCannell's and Said's arguments have stood the test of time against the development of new tourism forms. Within this background, the overall aim of the paper is to explore the nature of tourism's meeting grounds of residents and tourists by critically questioning the theoretical grounding that has influenced tourism studies in the last years and still does to date. This is done by discussing empirical findings from research conducted in Ban Mae Kampong, a village in Northern Thailand that engages in CBT. Hence, this paper presents empirical evidence to challenge the Orientalist discourse in tourism research and also the idea that tourism in remote or vulnerable communities will result in negative outcomes for the host community.

The paper starts by tracing Said's (1978) *Orientalism* – the masterpiece of postcolonial thought and discourse – and relating it to a detailed analysis of MacCannell's (1992) ideas. The two works have much in common and have contributed significantly to the negative connotation of tourism and the host-guest relationship more specifically. It further discusses the possibility of the tourism encounter to turn into a space for change and consequently introduces CBT as the broader context of this study. The paper continues by laying out the study context and methodology used before proceeding to a discussion of the findings.

ORIENTALISM, EMPTY MEETING GROUNDS, AND TOURISM

Said's (1978) Orientalism as both a discourse and system of knowledge the West holds about the Orient has experienced manifold usage in tourism research, particularly the postcolonial and socially constructed division into Orient and Occident or Self and Other (Aitchison, 2001; Caton & Santos, 2009; Osagie & Buzinde, 2011; van der Duim et al., 2005; Yan & Santos, 2009). This is particularly applicable to the tourism encounter, with residents in the developing world's tourist destinations presented as exotic, pristine, and authentic, whereas the Western tourist enjoys the image of the advanced and superior (Caton & Santos, 2009). In order to establish a link between Orientalism and tourism, Table 1 lists main characteristics that demonstrate the connections between the two.

What clearly emerges from Table 1 is the notion of hegemony as a core characteristic of Orientalism and tourism, whereby the Self (i.e. the West, the Occident, or the superior identity) dominates the Other (the exotic Orient), which can be studied for reasons of self-identification (Said, 1978). It is not surprising that tourism is often seen as a microcosm of Orientalism due to its exploitative nature with the tourist gazing at cultural difference and resident communities and consuming them in a subtle way (Urry, 2002). Thereby, tourists' main travel motives are often self-identification (Crouch, 2004; Meethan, 2006) and self-realization (MacCannell, 1992). These rather egoistic travel motives, paired with the subtle political, economic, and sociocultural control the industry exercises (Giampiccoli, 2007) contribute a great deal to the negative aftertaste of tourism literature and establish a connection between Orientalism and tourism.

Most importantly, Western imaginations create mere representations rather than realities of the Other – both within the context of Orientalism and tourism. Tourism relies upon created myths and fantasies for marketing purposes (Selwyn, 1996; Pritchard, 2000; Yan & Santos, 2009) to ultimately attract the authenticity-seeking tourist (MacCannell, 1976) who arrives at the destination with pre-formed perceptions of natives (Osagie & Buzinde, 2011). Just like the Orient, residents are often museumized and seen as fixed in time and space (Burns, 2001, 2006; MacCannell, 1992): i.e. passive objects waiting to be discovered (Said, 1978).

MacCannell (1992) picks up some of the major aspects of Orientalism and applies these to the tourism encounter. According to him, tourism's meeting ground is one "where people live and tourists visit" (MacCannell, 1992, p. 176), a place without any real relationships or bonds between the two and marked by economic transactions, consumption, and suppression. MacCannell refers to tourism as a meeting point of post-moderns and ex-primitives, with the former characterized by a constant movement (not only due to tourism) and in search of what s/he has lost due to modernity. This relates to MacCannell's (1976) idea of the search for the authentic, as already stated in *The Tourist* (MacCannell, 1976). However, the tourist confronts an "ex-primitive", a performative primitive and a myth in terminology that is due to the influences of globalization and used to keep tourists' desire for the exotic alive (MacCannell, 1992, p. 26). This encounter yields nothing but exploitation, without the possibility of a beneficial situation for both sides (MacCannell, 1992). Table 2 presents an overview of MacCannell's major arguments, put into comparison with Valene

Orientalism (see Said, 1978)	Tourism
Orient as socially constructed by the West, 'orientalized'	Industry with economic value and social significance (Nyaupane et al., 2008)
Construction of the Orient helps the West to define itself through establishing contrast	Travelling for the purpose of self-identification or –change (Meethan, 2006; Noy, 2004)
Orient as a discourse constructed through: representation of cultures, histories, language by the West, experienced through the 'lenses' of literature, travel and stereotypes shaping the encounter with the Other	Reinforces cultural representations through creating reality *a priori* (through marketing, travel brochures, imagery, etc.), expectations and knowledge influence the host-guest encounter (Pritchard, 2000)
West as dominating power (hegemony), superior identity: 'us' versus 'the Other', domestication of the exotic	Condemned for hegemonic power of its (mostly Western) actors in economic, political, and sociocultural terms reigning over residents in less developed countries (Giampiccoli, 2007)
West 'knows better' how to represent the Orient and decides on what is good for the Other; Orient regarded as a passive object that can be studied	Development discourse dominated by Western ideas in the past – tourism development done to/ for versus by the community (empowerment) (Scheyvens, 2002; Telfer & Sharpley, 2008)
Representations instead of truth, Orientalism as a system of power and ideology	Postcolonial theory influencing tourism studies (Osagie & Buzinde, 2011)
Variety and distinctiveness of Eastern cultures is generalized under the term 'Orient'	Cultural homogenization affecting tourism and tourists in search of the authentic (Gotham, 2005; MacCannell, 1976)
Orient gains its sense with the Western consumer only - defining culture for own benefits, not for purposes of truth	Cultural difference in tourism highlighted to benefit the West – the tourist who is chasing myths (Selwyn, 1996)
Orient is regarded as given, as an *a priori* knowledge and certainty locked in itself, unchangeable (e.g. in travel books) and fixed in time and space	Exotic cultures regarded as fixed in time and space due to usage as asset and basis for the tourist product (Burns, 2001, 2006)
Orient is toured and watched but the European stays detached without involvement	Tourist in search of the authentic trying to get close to natives but constantly gazing upon and consuming the Other (MacCannell, 1976; Urry, 2002)

Table 1. Orientalism and tourism
(sources indicated in the table; own compilation).

Smith's (1989) *Hosts and Guests*, a milestone in tourism research of the host-guest encounter. A comparison is useful insofar as both works are widely used within the anthropology of tourism, with Smith tending to regard tourism as less exploitative than MacCannell.

What becomes obvious from Table 2 is that, whereas MacCannell seems to condemn tourism (to 'exotic' places) and its impossibility of equality, Smith sees a chance for mutual understanding through a closer contact between hosts and guests. According to Smith, the nature of interactions depends on the type of tourism and tourist – at the same time, though, she acknowledges the tourist in search of meaning and the exotic. The dichotomy and difference between host and guest is not denied, however, it is argued that cultural brokers can contribute a fair part in mediating between them (Nash, 1989). Hence, tourism as a social phenomenon even offers the possibility

MacCannell's (1992) *Empty Meeting Grounds* is …	Smith's edited volume (1989) *Host and Guest* discusses …
… the result of polyglot communities that are "nothing more than a territorial entity with a unified economy … and perhaps a single race" (p. 2).	… a transitional touristic social system based on the relationship between host and guest and their played roles and power relations (Nash, 1989).
… the theoretical free space between dialogue-partners, where the division into 'I' and 'he' as well as subject and object is permanent.	… the emergence of stereotypes in the host-guest encounter, where hosts become objectified. (This can be changed though through a closer contact in homestays e.g.) (Smith, 1989).
… the meeting ground where ex-primitives perform and post-moderns consume what is lost due to modernity, i.e. a place of commercialization.	… cultural homogenization and the growing importance of 'model cultures', i.e. cultural reconstructions of the past to divert tourists away from hosts' private life (Smith, 1989).
… "a place where people live and tourists visit" (p. 176), i.e. a staged community without human relationships or bonds due to the division into economic gain (host) and self-realization (tourist).	… the social disruption of hosts, which is dependent on the type of tourism and the number of tourists, i.e. it is sought to establish categories of tourism and tourists (Smith, 1989).
… the reality of an "utopian vision of profit without exploitation" (p. 28).	… tourism as a form of imperialism, where the center controls the periphery (Nash, 1989).
… the reality of the host-guest encounter in tourism, where the tourist seeks "to experience a place where human relationships still seem to exist" (p. 177), but is confronted with a lack in real bonds.	… a meeting point of hosts and guests where either the latter wants to "become acquainted with local people", which may even lead to understanding (Smith, 1989, p. 9) or interactions are impersonal (Nash, 1989).
… socially constructed and performative ethnicity in the form of ethnic tourism – helping to enforce racism by pretending equality.	… ethnic tourism as a combination of nature and culture tourism to satisfy the demands of the curious tourist in search of the exotic and meaning (Smith, 1989).
… hegemonic in nature with a superior Self and an oppressed Other, where human difference is tried to be suppressed, i.e. poles and divisions collapsed.	… the dichotomy between host and guest, i.e. two separate poles/divisions, where difference cannot be denied and where cultural brokers can mediate between them (Nash, 1989).
… the chance of positive involution, i.e. making the community use its qualities for its own development.	… the chance of cultural involution, i.e. using representation through tourism for preservation and status creation (Mckean, 1989).

Table 2. The host-guest encounter in tourism: Two theoretical perspectives (sources indicated in the table; own compilation).

of a so-called "cultural involution" where representation is used by locals for the purpose of preservation and cultural pride (Mckean, 1989, p. 119). Despite MacCannell's rather skeptical outlook on tourism and the encounter between people(s), he recognizes the chance of a "positive involution", i.e. using the community's qualities for its own development in the future (MacCannell, 1992, p. 306).

Both works share similar views on the exploitative nature of tourism and the encounter between host and guest. Still, MacCannell's referral to a division into subject and object, or Self and Other, and the difficulty of emerging relationships based on the objectification of the Other, are key points that distinguish the two works. While

Smith mentions the impact of pre-formed stereotypes on hosts, she acclaims the chance of personal contact and meaningful interaction.

MacCannell's reference to the postmodern world characterized by commercialization and the loss of human bonds is also picked up by Bauman (2000) in his idea of the *liquid modernity*. His metaphor is useful for examining tourism as a social phenomenon in a restless and 'fluid' society that is unable to assimilate changes. With people constantly on the move and more individualistic than ever, the community becomes a utopia of harmony and security (Bauman, 2000). The search for both individual freedom and security as well as the restless nature of the postmodern subject affects social relations: The meeting of strangers, implied by the accelerated movement of people, seems to be a "mis-meeting", i.e. quick encounters with neither interaction nor depth (Bauman, 2000, p. 95) that resemble MacCannell's Empty Meeting Grounds.

RETHINKING TOURISM ENCOUNTERS

The previous section has highlighted the somewhat negative light cast upon the tourism encounter. This can largely be led back to the usage of binary divisions in tourism research, characterizing inequalities between a Self versus an Other or the West versus the South, which some regard as simplistic and in need to be deconstructed (van der Duim et al., 2005; McNaughton, 2006; Woosnam, 2010). One argument is that the anthropology of tourism should move away from examining the Other to studying the space in-between parties in order to understand the meaning they construct together (Nash, 1996; van der Duim, 2007a, 2007b). It should also move from focusing on the tourists' viewpoint only towards including the host perspective (Trupp, 2014) and consider counter-arguments to the Empty Meeting Grounds. This is useful in order to generate an understanding of the potential that the tourism encounter could bear for change and empowerment (Dolezal, 2015). Maoz's (2006) *mutual* gaze is such an example, acknowledging that the gaze can be returned and that hosts are no longer the object of the gaze as once argued by Urry (2002). In addition, third parties, such as guides, can act as mediators between tourists and residents (Jensen, 2010), micro-finance in CBT projects can enable women to start their own businesses and foster a sense of pride and achievement (Megarry, 2008), and possibilities for self-representation and self-commodification on the global consumer market can increase local control (Ruiz-Ballesteros & Hernández-Ramírez, 2010). Some argue that, for instance, the presentation of culture and traditional knowledge to tourists can even lead to empowerment when they show an interest in residents' life (Miettinen, 2005).

A move away from one-sided analyses that prove disempowering for residents towards postmodern analyses (based on understanding the space of the guest-host-relation and using dynamic conceptualizations of power) can enable an acknowledgement of residents' agency to ultimately foster greater power equality in the tourism encounter (Dolezal, 2011; Hollinshead, 1998; Uriely, 2005). Leveling power relations between host and guest goes hand in hand with the cross-cultural understanding enabled through social interactions in tourism (van der Duim et al., 2005). The cultural differences between the two parties, however, need to persist to avoid affecting the

tourism product due to unfulfilled expectations of meeting the exotic (Yang, 2011). On the other hand, MacCannell (2011) argues that for the tourist the "other must not be so profoundly other as to preclude the tourist from relaxing in its presence and 'taking it in'. Differences are rounded off to make the passage of tourists possible." (p. 219). Still, there is a chance of identification through differentiation, which happens "when tourists' attempts to positively differentiate themselves from one another collapse in a moment of identification with the Other" (Gillespie, 2007, p. 580). Nevertheless, this collapse of Self and Other needs familiarity with the Other (Gillespie, 2007), which might be difficult or unwanted in tourism. This is largely characterized by brief, commercial transactions between consumer and producer (Cheong & Miller, 2000).

Based on these assumptions, the subsequent empirical investigation should cast light on the possibility of the tourism encounter as a space for change, with a particular focus on CBT as an alternative form of tourism.

COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM

CBT emerged as an alternative form of tourism against mass tourism and its negative impacts (Yamashita, 2003) to ultimately prevent dependency and inequality and increase residents' control in managing tourism activities (Hipwell, 2009). In the best case, CBT not only involves the community in the implementation and managing of the tourism product but also in planning and developing it (Boonratana, 2010; Novelli & Gebhardt, 2007). Furthermore, CBT should contribute to a development strategy that exceeds economic gains and aims at sustainability, agency, and freedom (Matarrita-Cascante, 2010). In doing so, CBT uses existing natural and cultural resources and contributes to their preservation, while also fostering understanding between residents and tourists (Boonratana, 2010).

Still, CBT is often romanticized and presented as a utopian idealization of reality (Matarrita-Cascante, 2010). Academics and practitioners alike criticize CBT for being too small-scale to effectively help relieve poverty (Mitchell & Muckosy, 2008). Other limitations of CBT include the uncertainty of the extent of real community involvement or empowerment, mainly because power relations within the community and wider tourism network are highly complex (Matarrita-Cascante, 2010). Communities often only participate in the implementation of agendas that are decided upon by external parties (Butcher, 2007) and important decisions come from the usual tourism actors, such as governments or private investors (Mitchell & Muckosy, 2008). Putting people at the forefront, CBT supposedly builds on democracy, however, the mere fact of not offering any alternative to locals contradicts this democratic orientation (Butcher, 2003). Thus, extensive capacity building at local level is needed to enable community members to understand their possibilities and make more informed decisions (Novelli & Gebhardt, 2007). In a case study of tourism in western Flores, for example, Erb (2015) demonstrates that tourism needs to be connected to training to lead to village development. Difficulties exist particularly in pursuing a type of development that coincides with everyone's ideas as communities and individuals' opinions are extremely heterogeneous (Blackstock, 2005; Gursoy et al., 2009; McNaughton, 2006; Nash, 2004; van der Duim et al., 2005).

Despite the mentioned criticism of CBT, residents, or the once Others, are said to be more involved in tourism planning through CBT projects (van der Duim et al., 2005). After all, CBT emerged out of a shift in the development agenda to a more community-based and neopopulist one (Butcher, 2007) and is thus representative of a wider shift in tourism development which, slowly but still, becomes a more sustainable and reflective practice. This can be led back to tourism casting a number of positive benefits, such as, for instance, shifting power to local communities through the creation of community ventures (Novelli & Gebhardt, 2007), environmental and cultural preservation (Boonratana, 2010), local participation (Lapeyre, 2010), socio-economic diversification (Snyder & Sulle, 2011; Zapata et al., 2011) and increased resilience for sustainable development (Ruiz-Ballesteros, 2011). A number of community-based initiatives emerged over the past years, particularly as part of what is usually called 'indigenous tourism' (Butler & Hinch, 2007), i.e. touristic visitation of indigenous people. In many cases these can cast economic gains while also bearing potential to improving indigenous groups' status politically in gaining power relative to other, usually more powerful, actors (Theodossopoulos, 2010). In addition, CBT can create a space for residents to represent themselves rather than be represented by third parties, as much as they reinvent themselves through the tourism encounter (Amoamo, 2011; Miettinen, 2005). Given these complex dynamics between the actors involved, CBT is a twofold phenomenon. Seen from a macro perspective, it bears potential to shift power from external actors (e.g. governments or foreign investors) to the local level while at the same time, it can foster local power inequalities and competition at micro level (Dolezal, 2015).

STUDY SETTING AND METHODS

The empirical research for this study was undertaken in Ban Mae Kampong (BMK), a village in Mae On district in Northern Thailand. Villagers identify themselves as *khon muang* (Northern Thai people), and are not part of the highland ethnic minority groups often referred to as 'hilltribes'. It is a best-practice CBT example in Thailand (TICA, 2008) and is divided into four different parts with the inner one being the most prosperous part of the village. From the center, the village spreads out two kilometers. Agricultural land and forests surrounding the village are most important for villagers' living as they rely on the production of coffee (Arabica) and Miang Tea. The streams running through BMK constitute an additional contribution to the financial income as they are used to produce electricity, which is sold to other villages. BMK has produced electricity from hydropower since 1983, contributing a big part to its independence (UNDP, 2009).

The possibility of homestays in BMK as well as the village's CBT best-practice status are, amongst others, reasons for choosing the village as location for the empirical research of this study. BMK is also part of the Thailand Community-Based Tourism Institute (CBT-I, see: www.cbt-i.org), which highlights community development and participation in and through tourism. The CBT-I facilitates research on CBT in Thailand as well as cooperation amongst stakeholders in CBT. It also provides training of villagers engaging in tourism. Moreover, BMK has received marketing and funding support from the Ministry of Tourism and the Tourism Authority Thailand

(Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2015). The role of the village chief (at the time of study), Phrommin Phrommala, further contributed to tourism success. He initiated tourism in BMK in 1996, focusing on a sustainable tourism strategy: Tourism is allocated around long-term planning, making the village use their resources for a sustainable future and business without trying to follow other examples of mass tourism destinations (UNDP, 2009).

Tourism in the village takes place in the form of day trips, Flight of the Gibbon adventure tours (i.e. a tourism company based in the village), and homestays. The village is attractive for a wide range of international and local tourists, including school groups, families, couples, and travel groups coming to BMK as a part of their pre-booked tours. It is a place of learning for international and local school classes as it serves as a fieldtrip location for ecology classes or outdoor training. While day trippers spend only a limited period of time in the village, enjoying a walk to the waterfall or some Arabica coffee, homestay tourists spend a more considerable amount of time and also money. While day trippers' contact with locals remains rather shallow, homestay tourists are generally more involved with the family they stay with (Boonratana, 2010).

Homestays were introduced to BMK in 2000 and 17 out of 123 households offered rooms to tourists at the time of the research. Not all households in the village are able to offer this service as this means undertaking major changes on the house to meet Thai homestay standards. Villagers are either directly involved in tourism through homestay or guiding or indirectly through manufacturing handicrafts or offering transportation. Even those villagers working in tourism focus primarily on the production and harvest of tea or coffee, but welcome the work in tourism especially for the time when they are under-occupied. Hence, the village does not depend solely on tourism, as it is not the main source of income (Phrommin Phrommala, personal communication, June 23, 2011). A part of the income from tourism is shared between the households in the community. For example, around USD 10 of the 18 homestay per night go to the village fund, collecting money for emergency cases (Phrommin Phrommala, personal communication, June 25, 2011). Despite these efforts, various studies proved the gap in income between rich and poor (Suriya, 2011; Untong et al., 2006), suggesting prosperity inequalities in the village and social inequalities that come to the surface in the form of community conflict (Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2015).

The methods used for this study consist of observations, informal semi-structured interviews, and conversations with residents and tourists in BMK. Observations focused on interactions between locals and tourists and their behavior as well as village life and helped frame the analysis. In total, twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted in June 2011 with villagers of the inner two clusters of the village, who are main actors in tourism (see Table 3). Interviews focused on homestay owners and those involved in tourism in other ways, while at the same time also including villagers who have limited contact to tourists.

To understand the interactions between locals and tourists, observations proved most important as tourists' time resources were scarce (especially for day visitors). Nevertheless, individual/group discussions were arranged where possible. Eleven people participated in the latter, with an additional number of tourists forming part

Interviewee No.	Gender, Age Group	Occupation, Selection Criteria
Person 1	male 60-80 years	homestay, Miang tea plantation and harvest, guides coordinator (former guide), musician → experience with tourists
Person 2	female 40-60 years	homestay, Miang tea plantation and harvest, handicraft producer and seller → role of handicrafts
Person 3	female 40-60 years	Miang tea plantation and harvest, food stand/restaurant → no or barely any direct contact with tourists
Person 4	female 20-40 years	homestay, tour guide, massage, massage coordinator → contact with tourists on different levels
Person 5	female 60-80 years	homestay, Miang tea plantation and harvest → contact with tourists, older generation
Person 6	female 60-80 years	homestay, sewing → contact with tourists, single woman
Person 7	female 40-60 years	Miang tea plantation and harvest, small grocery store → barely any direct contact with tourists
Person 8	male 40-60 years	homestay, Miang tea plantation and harvest, coffee → contact with tourists, gender
Person 9	female 40-60 years	homestay, Miang tea plantation and harvest, handicrafts → importance of handicrafts
Person 10	female 40-60 years	Flight of the Gibbon, Miang tea plantation and harvest → employed at a company from outside
Person 11	female 20-40 years	homestay, restaurant → regular contact with tourists, age
Person 12	male 40-60 years	village chief

Table 3. Interviewed villagers (own compilation).

of observations. Participants were chosen to be representative of different age groups, gender, and nationalities. Frame analysis was used to identify common themes and categories (Gray, 2003). It is a technique that is used mainly for understanding differing perspectives, e.g. power relations and underlying assumptions on specific social phenomena (Bullock, 2010). Thereby, patterns arise if enough individuals share similar viewpoints or actions (Oliver & Johnston, 2010) based on the premise that "when two or more people hold the same frame(s) regarding a situation, they are said to be socially constructing reality" (Bullock, 2010, p. 25). In this article, frame analysis focuses on interviews, hence it examines perspectives of tourists and hosts through spoken data. Observations form a vital part of the research by providing an active field of context. Common themes emerging from the analysis are then categorized and underlying frames – for both residents and tourists – deduced. For practical

reasons, the analysis is deliberately based on the binary division of 'residents' versus 'tourists'. This separation allows for both sides being represented, hence it enables a balanced voice.

Challenges and limitations during the fieldwork included, amongst others, the small number of tourists visiting the village. This is mainly due to the weather conditions as the rainy season is the low season for tourism (Suriya, 2011). Moreover, given the theoretical underpinnings only *farang* (foreign) tourists were subject of the research. In terms of the host community, the challenge was mainly to gain an adequate understanding of the cultural context: In Thai culture – largely influenced by Buddhism – communication tends to be indirect in order not to 'lose face' and smiling in Thailand has different meanings besides happiness and approval (Berger, 2007; Slagter & Kerbo, 1999). Consequently, it is important to note that frames get their meaning by the community producing them (Santos, 2004). In addition, this study largely focuses on resident interviewees who form part of tourism to gain an understanding of their perspective on the tourism encounter. It does not, however, address the power relations within the wider community, a topic that future research will need to tackle.

FINDINGS

Residents

— *The Nature of Tourism for Residents*

One of the key aspects that emerged from the data analysis is residents' positive attitude towards tourism and tourists. Residents regard tourism as work, however, besides the financial profit, it generates pride and contributes to variety in daily tasks. Locals express feelings of excitement, for example, one villager (person 8) said that "having tourists in our house every day would mean more fun for us as it is not that calm when we have a visit and we like talking to people and treating them well". Others say that the fun in tourism lies in communication, including pointing at words and trying to get by with basic vocabulary (person 1). Generally, tourism is a preferred job, as it is easy work, compared to the hard Miang tea harvest (person 5). It even makes their work more interesting (e.g. producing handicrafts) when tourists constitute an audience and even participate in the work (person 9). Tourists' interest therefore generates pride amongst villagers.

Still, not everyone in the village participates equally in tourism or is trained for it. While most interviewees who are active in tourism feel confident interacting with tourists, others show an inability to welcome tourists and to communicate, which hinders them from feeling proud (person 7). "I am afraid that tourists are not happy here because they do not understand the language", is what one villager (person 7) said in response to whether she wants to participate in tourism.

— *Villagers' View of the Tourists' World*

Empirical evidence revealed that residents regard money as a threat to the sharing

community and as a characteristic of the West, where life is thought to depend on money and consumption (person 4). Villagers make a clear distinction between village life and life in the West. The farangs' world is pictured as sad, a world characterized by individuals that are so busy that they have no time for each other (person 2, 3 and 4). This view expands into picturing farangs as constantly consuming, a lifestyle totally different from the idea of a sharing village or community (person 2, 3 and 4). One of the villagers even feels sorry for the tourists because of their stressful life and would like to understand their language to give them warmth and a feeling of family and belonging (person 4). Many interviews revealed the connection between village life, family, and a sense of community that tourists lack in the villagers' view.

— *Interactions With Tourists*

When it comes to interactions, data revealed difficulties for both residents and tourists due to a lack of language skills. Interactions take place in form of sign language rather than direct spoken communication, which leads, amongst others, to an unwillingness to participate in tourism due to the possibility that farangs "might laugh at me because I cannot speak their language" (person 3). Others argue that studying languages together with tourists would assist in learning from each other, even though knowledge might be forgotten quickly (person 8). Nevertheless, language remains an obstacle that hinders fruitful interactions between residents and tourists. When referring to foreign tourists, residents tend to use the term *farang*, which is used for foreigners with white skin. While tourists may regard this term as impolite, it was found that the word is used merely descriptively, i.e. to differentiate between Thai and foreign visitors (person 1). There is an absence of racist connotations and hosts are aware of the term's impolite character in tourists' eyes, hence they avoid using it in the presence of guests (person 8).

Interactions with tourists are generally positive for residents after having overcome an initial phase of shyness (person 1). In BMK, residents are teachers of a sustainable lifestyle, admired by tourists for their demonstration of skills and healthy way of living, which they educate tourists about (person 3). Still, besides some degree of language skill, interactions require effort from both sides. When tourists, for example, do not ask villagers to join them for dinner, they will have food on their own (person 6). Hence, sensibility and openness turn out to be key for both residents and tourists who co-construct the tourism encounter. This example also shows that in CBT, encounters are more natural and evolving rather than characterized by one-sided offensiveness.

Interactions, however, are not limited to direct contact and conversations but equally involve gestures such as the usage of cameras. Residents acknowledge the fact that for tourists travelling involves capturing the Other with the camera. However, rather than feeling disturbed by tourists taking pictures, residents are convinced that tourists' motive behind it is an interest in their life and work (person 5). Disruption takes place when people have wrong intentions and bad morals: "When they smile, I also smile. It depends on their heart, some people look good and have evil hearts, some don't but [have] a good heart" (person 8).

Regarding residents' positive attitude towards tourists, it is not surprising that tour-

ists staying longer than a few nights somewhat become a temporary family member and are remembered when they leave (person 8). In BMK, relationships that resemble friendships seem to emerge: Some of the villagers receive pictures from their guests and proudly present photo albums (person 2 and 5). Tourists – be it Thais or farangs – return to the same homestays to undertake activities with their hosts, thereby pointing towards emerging friendships. The data also revealed that villagers prefer hosting farangs to Thai tourists, who are regarded as demanding, disrespectful, loud and polluting the environment (person 4 and 10).

— Community Collaboration, Influence From Outside and Development

BMK is well organized in terms of job and task allocation given that every person living in BMK is part of one of more village associations (e.g. massage, souvenir production etc.). Generally speaking, although collaboration could be observed between those participating in tourism, villagers are not all equally involved in tourism as mainly the interior two clusters participate directly. One of the challenges in making CBT a true community enterprise is to involve all villagers – a challenge that seems impossible given that not all want to participate in tourism. Some villagers are convinced that collaboration and consent are indispensable for making CBT work (person 8 and 9) and selfish thinking – stemming mainly from those who are originally from outside the village, is destructive for tourism and village life.

At the same time, development in the village signifies a certain influence from outside (e.g. established television connections, companies from outside operating in the village, private investors buying land) and poses a threat to the sharing community. The future is connected to feelings of fear and uncertainty as many expressed their concerns about people selling properties to entrepreneurs who do not share the community mindset (person 4). However, the selling of land is a reality, particularly because more young villagers search job opportunities in the city of Chiang Mai. There is a pronounced fear that the young generation will not return to the village due to limited job opportunities that do not require physical strain (such as Miang harvest) (person 8 and 9). Brain-drain therefore constitutes one of the biggest threats to the village and CBT, although "the community's most valuable asset may be the energy of its young people" (Hipwell, 2009, p. 302).

Tourists

— Tourist Experience

When it comes to the overall tourism experience, it was found that tourists' motives to visit BMK vary. For some, experiencing a novel and different way of living and interacting with residents prevails (Spanish couple), while for others, the physical environment, i.e. the forest and traditional houses (American couple, French male tourist), constitute the key attraction. Tourists' stays in BMK are generally of short duration (i.e. ranging from a few hours to 3 nights) given that most tourists visit BMK as part of an organized roundtrip (French travel group, Spanish couple). For these tourists, Thailand's rural areas present a place to relax and escape daily routine, but

they would not stay longer (Spanish couple) as they miss their busy lifestyle (American couple) and the lack of comfort: "No, it is not organized here, one or two days and that's it, only to see the forest and all that" (French male). This contradicts the view of some homestay owners, as presented above – oftentimes accepting tourists as temporary family members.

— *Authenticity*

Authenticity emerged as a key frame in tourists' experiences, with tourists trying to get off the beaten track (e.g. on walking tours), arguing that what they like most is "to get away from the places that are most touristic [to see] the life of real people" (Spanish female). Tourists regard 'the authentic' as a positive construct connected to residents' warm-hearted and natural way of interacting with tourists, which may be harmed by development (French female). Tourists avoid staged events and, based on their fear of encountering staged events, even regard those events forming part of daily village life as contrived. CBT therefore seems to constitute an escape from the oftentimes contrived touristic world, while skepticism in regards to how authentic the village really is, remains. A group of French tourists, for instance, believed that when their guide told them to give alms to the monks, those monks would only walk by as a demonstration for tourists. They did not know that this very day was *wan phra* (Buddhist holy day), where it was usual for monks to collect alms.

— *Development and the Other*

Interviews revealed that tourists believe a balance should be found between tradition and development (French female). Progress is particularly important for tourists when it comes to comfort: "There are no mirrors for men to shave, the toilets are wet, you need a towel for your feet afterwards. No, it is not organized" (French male). While comfort may be missing for tourists, BMK is not regarded as poor or underdeveloped:

> Here people have warm water, which was a surprise, they are really well equipped here, like with the streets, electricity everywhere. The people are poor, above all in the big cities, but here they are better off, they are rich. (French female)

Hence, poverty is relative to the living conditions in the respective country, a view that is shared by others:

> To me the village does not seem poor. When you see the houses, it is not poor. When we were in Bangkok in some places you have the feeling that the people are poor, here I see a way of life that resembles much a rural village in Spain. They can eat, they have everything they need, they do not lack anything. (Spanish female)

This statement reveals that this particular tourist compares the Other to the own socio-cultural context she comes from, potentially leading to an identification with

the Other and the once foreign. Furthermore, some tourists perceive seeing and experiencing the Other as an advancement of their own personality: "We chose Thailand to see other cultures, other ways of living, learn about ourselves. It is like learning that there is another world" (Spanish male). The aspect of learning is essential in BMK, also because the tourist product fosters tourists' admiration of villagers' self-sustaining lifestyle. During a walking tour in the forest, a French couple, for instance, was impressed by the sustainable and efficient way the forest's resources are used. Hence, in CBT, residents teach tourists through means of educational tourism. This also happens in the form of students visiting BMK, who constitute more than half of the tourist numbers in the village (Boonratana, 2012), ultimately turning the village into a place of learning and education.

— *Interactions With Hosts*

Communication between tourists and residents is complex in BMK. Whereas hosts are better able to cope with language barriers, tourists' behavior was generally shy, perceiving the lack in English language skills of the host family as a problem (American couple). Attitudes towards communication with hosts varied between tourists as some showed efforts to communicate, such as a study group from Australia where students used vocabulary sheets to ask questions. For others, residents' lack in language skills was a major argument for non-interaction: "No, the family does not eat with us ... You cannot talk to them because they do not speak English, in Bangkok they speak English everywhere" (French male). Observations made the dialectic nature of communication obvious, demanding effort from both residents and tourists to enable fruitful communication. When this effort is given, meaning can evolve through constructing and playing with words together – or at least attempting to do so (French couple).

The knowledge that is transmitted to tourists needs the help of cultural brokers, taking the form of guides from outside the village who enable translation between residents and tourists. In BMK, one villager accompanies the external guide on walking tours, where the local guide gives information to the broker who translates to tourists. Although in this case locals are unable to represent themselves in spoken language, a certain level of communication with tourists and their understanding of the local context emerges. Nevertheless, tourists' education and the transmission of knowledge take time and are not always possible during their rather short stays in the village. It was observed that tourists do not have enough knowledge about the village to make correct judgments about Thai culture. This was revealed earlier when it came to the conflict concerning monks' alms collection.

DISCUSSION

The empirical evidence discussed in this paper enabled a more positive outlook compared to the tourism literature, which at times displays residents as suppressed and dominated by outside actors, especially tourists. In BMK, tourism does not only constitute a source of income but also presents an activity that enables the use and display of skills, characterized by enjoyable interactions and emerging friendships.

These may be due to the relatively small number of tourists who stay overnight and the fair distribution of overnight stays amongst households. As a consequence, tourists' visits are a special occasion for most homestay owners. Moreover, it was found that tourists do not necessarily regard residents as 'underdeveloped' and 'backwards'. Particularly the younger generation of tourists admires residents' lifestyle and seeks to benefit from interactions by learning from their hosts. Nevertheless, when tourists stay with residents for a short period of time, they tend to regard their hosts as mere servants, meaning that interaction is limited. As argued by Nash (1996) "the fact that tourists, being tourists, are *en passant*, a condition that, itself, tends to lead to superficial social contacts, might justify the broader use of the term "empty meeting grounds" for tourist-host contacts" (p. 87). In these interactions, it was found that hosts feel sorry for tourists who are in search of what they have lost due to modernization. At the same time, the tourists' search not only for the authentic, but also for values of family and togetherness, is not inherently negative as has so long been propounded in the literature. After all, no sign of residents' exploitation by tourists or unidirectional power-relations were observed. Tourists do 'gaze' in BMK, however, residents do not feel disturbed, meaning that the tourist gaze does not necessarily come with unequal power relations. After all, "[l]ooking is complex too. There is an engaging, connecting, caring content and character of looking, rather than merely a detached, observing, exploitative one" (Crouch, 2004, p. 92). Residents are well aware of what vacations mean for tourists and understand their oftentimes superficial travel motives. Rather than exploiting the tourist or regarding them as the new colonizers, residents feel sorry for them, wanting to share their feeling of family, togetherness, and community.

As a consequence, it emerged that in BMK tourists and residents (at least those actively involved in tourism) derive benefits from tourism equally. What has contributed to the assumed power inequality in literature is the way the Other is often museumized, exoticized and 'sold' to the tourist. However, particularly in CBT, locals should be agents who – given that they initiate and plan the tourism product – can control how they present and market themselves (Theodossopoulos, 2010). In BMK, CBT uses exoticism and difference to earn money – while at the same time keeping tourist numbers low – therefore benefiting residents rather than presenting a microcosm of Orientalism. This means that residents are not victimized but have agency in how to represent themselves, consciously choosing what parts of their identities they wish to display (Stronza, 2001). Also, in contrast to Thailand's hilltribe villages, villagers in BMK do not belong to an ethnic minority group, which turns nature and education, rather than people themselves, into the main attractions. Along with the interest that tourists show, this status enables residents to empower themselves much more than is usually argued for tourism in the developing world.

In the context of CBT in BMK, more equal power relationships between residents and tourists are possible, based on an encounter with an Other (be it resident or tourist) that is based on respect and learning. Residents and tourists alike co-construct the tourism encounter to produce mutual benefits, with residents earning an income and diversifying livelihoods and tourists gaining rich personal experiences. Through learning about difference, both parties also learn about themselves. The connections that are drawn between oneself and others, however, take time and familiarity (Gil-

lespie, 2007), which is not always possible in tourism. This study revealed that, if meaning is to be constructed in CBT, effort (not necessarily skills) is needed from both sides, happening through a play with words between residents and tourists. This is in line with Cohen's (2004) argument that communication in Thailand's tourism encounters often "is an enjoyable game in itself and … ease[s] the tension of the encounter between complete strangers" (p. 220). Therefore, the possibility of creating meaning and relationships even without linguistically understanding each other emerged from this study. Hence, while residents may be regarded as exotic, pristine, and authentic, they share the status of proud teachers who showcase their skills, knowledge, and lifestyle to tourists.

While the so-called Other may form the basis of the CBT attraction, this study did not reveal any of Orientalism's hegemonic and imperialistic thinking – even though comfort emerged as an issue highlighting pronounced differences between tourists' and residents' lifestyle. As a consequence, CBT may be a field where Orientalism is not an appropriate metaphor or theory, making room for tourists' involvement in local realities (subject to certain temporal limitations) and turning the tourism encounters into a space of appreciation. Without romanticizing the tourism encounter, the signs of understanding, respect and learning evidenced in this study can challenge MacCannell's (1992) propounded 'emptiness' in encounters. At the same time, one needs to acknowledge that MacCannell's ideas were conceptualized at a time when CBT was still a largely unknown type of tourism. In addition to changes in tourism planning and development, both tourists and residents are not as naïve as once pictured. Tourists are well aware – at times even paranoid – of the 'staging' of events and residents do not always perform. In fact, they try to give tourists a sense of warmth and family. They "create ersatz communities to manufacture and even to sell a sense of community" (MacCannell, 1992, p. 89), which should not immediately be regarded as problematic. At the same time, however, this paper has shown the dilemmas that BMK and many other CBT villages face. As Kontogeorgopoulos et al. (2015) mention, tourism in BMK runs the danger of threatening 'rural authenticity' and the Thai principle of the 'self-sufficiency economy', which serves as the major attraction for both domestic and international tourists. With tourism and development, influence from outside is usually unavoidable, which is obvious in BMK where community spirit is increasingly disrupted and replaced by individualistic thinking and uneven benefits. This change in values poses a threat to the sharing community, the one aspect that seems to constitute the greatest asset for tourism in BMK.

CONCLUSION

This article has offered insights into tourism meeting grounds in CBT and has demonstrated the somewhat overcriticized nature of tourism research. While the theoretical concepts used in this study help us to shape our critical lens of the tourism encounter, this article showed that the socio-cultural realm of tourism is characterized by a theoretical grounding that is difficult to apply to alternative forms of tourism. In some cases, these types of tourism, including CBT or indigenous tourism, present more sustainable practices and different dynamics between residents and tourists than is the case for mass tourism. As a consequence, there is a need for more

empirically grounded research, particularly into the tourism encounter in CBT, in order to enable more nuanced analyses of tourism encounters in different tourism environments. The aim of this study was not to prove the inapplicability of MacCannell's thoughts, but to use his ideas and concepts to generate new insights in a CBT context. As MacCannell states himself, "nothing is healthier for the advancement of a field [than refutations]. So long as critiques and supportive studies are based on evidence, I look forward to joining the dialogue" (MacCannell, 2011, p. xi). MacCannell's intention with the Empty Meeting Grounds was certainly not a generalization of tourism's effect on societies, leading towards the need of making a distinction between mass tourism and other more alternative forms of tourism. In fact, this paper took MacCannell's ideas a step further, which already offered a hint of the changes that were and are still about to come. His idea of a positive involution connects to new and alternative forms of tourism, where the deadlocked concepts of inequality and binaries need refutation. It was found that the gaze exists but does not disturb, that meeting grounds can be characterized by fun and variety, and that appreciation, respect, and even friendships may emerge.

More research needs to be done that connects the wider community power relations to the tourism encounter, understanding how the social ties in the form of either collaboration or individualistic thinking play out in CBT, a business that is largely reliant on the existence of a 'community' in order to function effectively and as part of the attraction. Development through tourism, can, in turn, disrupt existing social ties that are the basis for CBT. Potential frustration, therefore, stems from the way tourism is managed and the fear of change rather than the tourism encounter. The latter, however, can serve as a window into intra-community relations, which often play out in the interactions that constitute the social space of the tourism encounter.

This study showed that the tourism encounter is a space that the (perhaps stereotypically restless) tourist and the (perhaps authentic) community co-construct, resulting in mutually fruitful relationships. In this case, it becomes a space of change, where the hosts' chance to teach the tourist escaping from an eventual daily empty meeting ground into the shelter of the – then rightly – romanticized community should neither be ignored, nor indicted but certainly seized.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Claudia Dolezal is a lecturer in tourism at the University of Westminster, London, UK. She specializes in tourism for development and the anthropology of tourism, in specific community-based tourism, empowerment, and the tourism encounter in rural Thailand and Bali. Claudia also is an editorial board member of ASEAS and contributes to the work of the Society for South-East Asian Studies (SEAS).

▸ Contact: c.dolezal@westminster.ac.uk